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ABSTRACT

This case study investigated the capability of school citizen advisory committees to collect, contain, and dissipate conflict. It examined the activities of the Ideal School citizen advisory committee in Vancouver, British Columbia, in 1976-77. The committee attempted to block a decision by the school board to move the school to a new location within another high school. Although several possible alternate sites were considered by the committee and the board, agreement could not be reached, and the board announced its plans to complete the relocation. An angry attack in the media was then launched on the school board by Ideal School teachers, parents, and community residents. Nevertheless, the move was accomplished. Four months later, a board attempt to move the school to an elementary site provoked a strong protest by residents of the elementary school neighborhood. In response, the school board chose yet another site, and the move was successfully made. The conclusion from this experience was that advisory committees function well in attracting and focussing conflict but are not effective at containing or dissipating the conflict. The committee could not prevent the school system-community conflict from exploding into the wider public arena. (Author/JM)

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CITIZEN ADVISORY COMMITTEES: THE FAULTY LIGHTNING ROD IN THE STORM OF SCHOOL-COMMUNITY RELATIONS

by

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BACKGROUND

Citizen Demand for Greater Involvement in Institutional Decision-Making

An increasing fact of life in North American Society is that large numbers of people are fed up with experts making decisions for them about schools, hospitals, zoning, merchandising and other facets of life controlled by our public and private institutions. More and more people are frustrated with unresponsive institutions that are seen to be suffering from the twin pathologies of excessive bureaucratization and excessive professionalism. As a result, an increasing demand is being heard for greater citizen participation in the decision-making processes of public and private institutions.

In responding to the demand, business, government and professional bodies have placed citizen representatives on their governing and regulatory bodies. In addition, a vast array of advisory committees have been established to provide for greater public input into the decision making process of the agencies run by business, government and the professions.

Traditional Patterns of Public Participation in Educational Decision-Making

Traditionally, schools have not been noted for their extensive programs of public involvement in the educational decision-making process. In fact, most schools have tended to treat citizens simply as listeners and reactors. That is, communications have been largely from the school authorities to the individual citizen and these communications have either informed the citizen about school policies or invited opinions on a proposed policy. In turn, school authorities expected to receive a response from the individual citizen; not a collective citizen response.

Under this traditional pattern of participation, a citizen rarely, if ever, initiated policy or blocked school policy.

The Rise of Citizen Advisory Committees in Schools

In the 1960's a demand arose for more collective citizen involvement in the educational decision-making process. During the 1970's this demand has mushroomed. The response of educational authorities to this demand for greater collective citizen involvement in educational decision-making has been largely the establishment of citizen advisory committees at the school level. So widespread have these committees become, that a U.S. national survey in 1973 showed that less than five per cent of school districts have schools without advisory committees of one sort or another (Citizens Advisory Committees, 1973, p.7). The committees have been given responsibility for advising school authorities on almost every aspect of school program, organization and policy.

In addition to their advisory functions, citizens' committees have been seen by school authorities as an important and useful mechanism for channelling public criticism and controversy in education. Through the inclusion of representatives from the school community it was hoped that school systems would be able to collect, contain and dissipate the constantly emerging hostilities and dissatisfactions that citizens have toward their schools. Through this process of collection, containment and dissipation, citizen advisory committees would thus serve to prevent violent eruptions and open conflicts between citizens and their schools.

In a real sense then, citizens' advisory committees were seen to be lightning rods in the permanently unstable weather conditions of school-community relations. Standing above and reaching out beyond the

schoolhouse, each advisory committee was to serve as a lightning rod intercepting potentially destructive strokes from a stormy community before these strokes hit the threatened schoolhouse.

The Study

The study investigated the lightning rod concept of citizen advisory committees. Stated more formally, the study examined the capability of citizen advisory committees at the school level to function as a formal institutional mechanism to channel school system-community conflict, that is to collect, contain and dissipate this conflict.

The results of the study are based on an examination of the activities and operations of a single citizen advisory committee at the school level in Vancouver over a one-year period from the fall of 1976 to the fall of 1977.

The committee studied was the Ideal School Consultative Committee. The data for the study were obtained from documentary sources, structured interviews and participant observation techniques. For the period of the study from January, 1977 onward, the author was an elected member of the Vancouver School Board and participated in the interaction that took place between the school board and the Ideal School Consultative Committee.

The case of the Ideal School Consultative Committee that is reported in this paper is one part of a three-part study done by the author of citizen school advisory committees in Vancouver.

School Consultative Committees in Vancouver

In August, 1975 the Vancouver School Board mandated the establishment of citizen advisory committees at the school levels throughout the school

district. The committees were to be called school consultative committees and each committee was to be an advisory body to the principal and staff on all aspects of school operation. By January, 1976 every school in the Vancouver area had a school consultative, including the one under study here, Ideal School.

THE CASE

Ideal School

Ideal School was begun in 1972 as a private school by a group of middle class parents who felt their children needed an alternative to the kind of secondary education then being offered in the large comprehensive public secondary schools of Vancouver. The basic philosophy of the school was the fostering of academic excellence. The school catered particularly to those students whose capabilities for intellectual and social growth had stultified by the impersonal atmosphere of the larger secondary school.

From its outset Ideal School was an educational success. By 1974 it was enrolling about one hundred students in a street-front operation An evaluation of the school revealed that many of the students in attendance had been potential drop-outs from regular secondary schools who were now succeeding in the more intimate and informal atmosphere of Ideal School (Middleton, 1975, p.4). The school was encountering, however, serious financial problems and a real danger existed that the school might have to close. Faced with this threat, the parents of the school asked the Vancouver School Board to make Ideal School a public school within the Vanocuver system. The board agreed to this and in 1974 a home was found for Ideal in a vacant elementary school in downtown

Vancouver.

Ideal School flourished in its downtown site. Although the building was old and lacked specialized instructional areas, it was commodious and close to many of the amenities of the city, such as the public library and art gallery. Above all, Ideal school was relatively free and autonomous. For administrative purposes, Ideal School was under the jurisdiction of the principal of the nearest secondary school. In reality, Ideal School had considerable freedom and autonomy as the principal interfered little in the day-to-day operations of the school.

In March, 1976 the Vancouver School Board decided in private session to move Ideal School from its downtown location to a block of empty classrooms in Lord Byng Secondary, a high school in the western end of the city. Several reasons were offered for the planned move.

Firstly, the downtown site needed costly major renovations to meet fire regulations. Secondly, the downtown site was valued at over six million dollars and was being considered for commercial re-development. Finally, in the opinion of the board's educational officials there was a need to move Ideal School into a setting which offered better facilities for its academic program. At this point, the parents, teachers and students of Ideal became alarmed at the prospect of their school being relocated in a large secondary school complex. The school consultative committee, which had been relatively inactive since its formation, sprang to life and began mobilizing parent, teacher and student opposition to the planned move. The school board, on encountering this opposition, decided not to proceed with the move of Ideal students to Byng Secondary.

During the summer and fall of 1976, officials of the board and the school consultative committee examined various possible sites for the

relocation of Ideal School. Agreement between officials and the committee could not be reached, however, and in December, 1976 the board decided to go ahead with its earlier plan to move Ideal School into Byng. This move was planned to take place in January, after the Christmas holodays.

Up to this point in time the discussions concerning the relocation of Ideal School had all been private discussions. The school board had always discussed the relocation question in camera as it was deemed to be a property matter. Similarly, the representation made by the Ideal School Consultative Committee to the board had always been made in private session. With the announcement that Ideal School would be relocated in a block of classrooms at Byng Secondary, the parents, teachers and students of Ideal decided to bring their case to the attention of the public. The first move in the publicization of Ideal's situation was a series of letters to the editors of Vancouver's dailies. One such letter from a group of Ideal students stated the case as follows:

> On December 6th, a representative of the Board stated that the irreversible decision was made that we be relocated at Byng. We feel that we have been unfairly treated and that our right to an individual beneficial education has been denied.... We feel much of our dilemma stems from political reasons... and our only option is to publicize the unjust treatment we have received. (Vancouver Sun, December 15, 1976)

In mid-December, the Ideal School consultative committee led a large delegation of parents, teachers and students to a school board meeting to protest the board's decision to move Ideal School to Byng. At one point in the meeting, a board member said he thought Ideal School was asking for treatment as a special, elitist group. In responding to this charge, the chairperson of the Ideal committee said:

> Ideal is not a privileged, elitist conspiracy, but is meeting the need of these who don't want to be treated like a

blob in high school....

Students in high school are made to feel they are too big or too small or too smart or not smart enough and so these children have walked out of those high schools.

Now you're asking them to walk back in there and face discrimination because they're part of this small group. (Vancouver Sun, December 17, 1976, p. 20)

Another parent at the same meeting stressed the importance of Ideal not being submerged with Byng:

We're concerned about our identity. The principal of Byng says we'll have separate programs but we'll still be part of the school.

We've tried to point out that we're a separate school, not just a separate program. (Vancouver Sun, December 17, 1976, p. 20)

A few days before the move to Byng was to take place the controversy over Ideal's relocation was heightened by a series of events. A television statement by a Vancouver School Board official that Ideal School was for "juvenile delinquents, drop-outs and those who cannot handle the regular school system" provoked a flurry of indignant comments. A newspaper article by a widely read columnist castigated the school board for moving Ideal School to Byng, calling Byng a "scummy school with greaseballs hanging around its outside doors" (Vancouver Province, January 6, 1977). In addition, he accused the school board of deception and falsehoods in its dealings with the Ideal School Consultative Committee.

In spite of the strong attack on the school board by Ideal School parents, teachers, students and people in the general community, the move of Ideal to Byng took place in January. The attacks did prompt the board, however, to pass a resolution promising to review the matter of accommodation for Ideal at Byng within the next six months.

For the next few months the public heard little about Ideal School

and how it was faring in its new Byng quarters. The Ideal School Consultative Committee was busy, however, and in April, 1977 it brought its concerns out into the public arena again. A letter to the editor by an Ideal committee spokesperson stated the nature of these concerns:

> My letter...[of] December 15 described my feelings of betrayal, as a parent, at the forced relocation of Ideal School to Lord Byng.
>
> Many reasons for the move and promises about the facilities were made to us. These bore little or no relation to what was actually available. The... 'separate building' was three classrooms, among other classrooms.... The promised complete independence and autonomy is a total farce; Ideal students are considered to be Lord Byng Students. (Vancouver Sun, April 4, 1977)

Early in May, the Ideal committee presented a brief to the Planning and Building Committee of the school board after a request to present the brief to the full school board in open session was denied. The brief said:

> From our perspective, it appeared that the Vancouver School Board was determined to move Ideal School... in order to free up valuable property, regardless of the consequences. Various confused and misleading statements came to be used to support the [board's] position....
>
> We think that parents, staff and students of Ideal School have been scapegoated..... (Brief to the Board of School Trustees, Vancouver, May 10, 1977, p. 1)

Prior to the presentation of the brief, the Superintendent of Schools had outlined the difficulties that were occuring at Byng Secondary. He indicated that there had been very little attempt on the part of Ideal School to integrate or cooperate with the Lord Byng staff. Ideal School staff and students had endeavoured to maintain the autonomy they had enjoyed at their previous site. In his opinion , the present situation was not working and the board would have to consider moving Ideal School out of Byng. (Vancouver School Board Committee II Report, May 10, 1977) The site that was proposed for relocation was a primary building in the quiet, upper middle class residential area of Shannon Park. This

building was previously occupied by a French immersion school for the elementary grades. This school was growing in numbers and a move to larger quarters was planned for September, 1977.

When the officials of the school board and the Ideal committee were examining possible relocation sites for Ideal School in the summer and fall of 1976, the Shannon Park building was one of two major sites discussed. The other was the primary building at Laurier Elementary School. Both these sites had been acceptable to the Ideal School committee.

At that time, however, officials of the board indicated that a move to Shannon Park was not possible because it would not be vacant until September, 1977 and a move of Ideal from its downtown site had to take place early in 1977. With reference to the Laurier primary building, officials of the board told the Ideal School committee that this site was unsuitable. The officials indicated that although the primary building was physically separated from the main elementary school, it would be undesirable to locate a secondary school on the grounds of an elementary school. Furthermore, the official said that the Laurier School Consultative Committee and Laurier residents would strongly oppose the location of Ideal school in their neighborhood.

Following the presentation of the Ideal committee's brief and the report of the Superintendent of Schools, the Planning and Building Committee decided that a move of Ideal School to the Shannon Park building should be considered by the school board. When news of this possible relocation of Ideal School became known, the quiet, affluent neighborhood of Shannon Park exploded into a frenzy of activity. In less than a week, a strong protest group had organized, prepared a brief, and appeared in force at the school board's mid-May meeting. The Shannon Park residents argued that

the location of a secondary school in their neighborhood would destroy its quiet, residential nature with loitering, cars, dancing and other activities (No Secondary School at Shannon Park Brief, May, 1977). The school board chairperson, in explaining to the meeting the proposed move of Ideal to Shannon Park, said:

> Ideal was set up for students who are inhibited by normal high school. The parents say their children feel hostility at Byng, and are afraid the students might drop out if they have to stay there.

At which point a woman with the Shannon Park delegation shot back, "So let them drop out, we don't want them." (Vancouver Sun, May 17, 1977).

In light of the open hostility shown toward Ideal school by the Shannon Park residents, the school board decided not to put Ideal in the Shannon Park area. After the vote was taken, a spokesperson for the Ideal committee addressed the board as follows:

> I wish you'd give some consideration to the schooling of these students as you have done to the fears of the residents of Shannon. I'm sympathetic to the concerns... that teenagers in the area may cause disruptions,... but I'm unsympathetic to bigots who express feelings toward Ideal when they don't even know what it's all about. (Vancouver Sun, June 7, 1977)

The end of the school year was approaching quickly and the question of where Ideal School would be located in September was still unresolved. The school board directed its officials to come up with an answer quickly and at the last meeting of the board in June, the officials recommended that Ideal School be located in the primary building at Laurier Elementary School. In mid-1976 officials had told the Ideal committee that this same site was unsuitable. At that time, the principal objections to the use of this site was expected neighborhood opposition to the location

of a secondary school on elementary school property.

The school board approved unanimously the relocation of Ideal School to the Laurier site. The decision was applauded loudly by the Ideal School Committee. The large scale neighborhood opposition to the placing of Ideal School in the Laurier primary building failed to materialize. The Laurier School Consultative Committee, which could have provided the organizing nucleus for neighborhood opposition, proved to be a non-existent organization. It existed on paper but had not met for two years. The Laurier residents who opposed the relocation of Ideal had to try to build a body of opposition from scratch. With the onset of the summer holidays, this proved to be impossible. Consequently, the Laurier community was only able to mount a weak protest. Over the summer months any remaining committee interest in opposing the relocation of Ideal dissipated. When school opened in September, the Ideal students were happily installed in their new home. The Ideal parents, teachers and students had finally achieved what they had fought for long and hard--the continuation of their school in a separate facility with operating autonomy.

ANALYSIS

Citizen Advisory Committees: The Faulty Lightning Rod

The purpose of this study was to investigate the capability of citizen advisory committees at the school level to function as formal institutional mechanisms for the channelling of school system-community conflict.

The single case, Ideal School and its advisory committee, that was studied indicates that advisory committees function very well as mechanisms for attracting, collecting and focusing school system-community conflict. In

this sense, the advisory committees do serve as lightning rods in the storm of school system-community relations. The advisory committees are faulty lightning rods, however, in terms of their capability for containing and dissipating the conflict. A major explosion between the school system and the Ideal school community did occur and it did spread into the general community.

As reported earlier in this paper, the Ideal case is one part of a three-part study of citizen advisory committees as formal institutions for channelling school system-community conflict. The results of the other two cases studied (but not reported here) are similar to the result in the Ideal case. Stated simply, the advisory committees functioned well as lightning rods in attracting, collecting and focusing the school system-community conflict. The committees were not effective, however, in containing or dissipating this conflict and in each case the school system-community conflict spread into the wider public arena.

Strengths and Weaknesses of Citizen Advisory Committees

Most of the literature on citizen advisory committees in education makes reference to their value as "wisdom-dispersing and policy-guiding agencies" (Citizens Advisory Committees, 1973, p.5). Less often is a careful examination made of the real nature of these committees in terms of their strengths and weaknesses.

Most citizen advisory committees at the school level provide for a kind of administrative rather than political participation (National Committee for Citizens in Education, 1975, p.209). The advisory committee is usually attached to the office of the principal and it can serve as an important ally for the principal in his dealings with the central office. In certain other cases, the central office and/or

the school board can enlist the support of the citizen advisory committee in offsetting opposition to its own policies from pressure groups in the community (eg. teacher or ratepayers organizations). In either case, advisory committees are an important political resource that can be deployed by school officials at the school or district level to strengthen their particular positions (Jennings, 1975, p. 244).

From time to time advisory committees emerge that are not administration - oriented. Almost invariably, these committees are seen by school officials as "not representing the community and as dominated by a few activists who have their own narrow interest" (National Committee for Citizens in Education, 1975, p.210). When an advisory committee seeks political participation rather than merely administrative participation, the potential for conflict with school officials exists. The advisory committee that asks for commitment and action from appointed and elected officials soon discovers how powerless it is. In a study of community advisory boards in New York City dealing with physical planning and capital budgeting, Yates (1973) found that these boards encountered enormous difficulties in dealing with city agencies. According to one board member, "You can get more accomplished with a bunch of voluntary Kiwanians with a handshake and a smile than you can with all the meetings in the world with the whole city bureaucracy" (Yates, 1973, p.41). In his study, Yates examined eight different types of decentralization plans operating in New York which provided for varying degrees of citizen participation and control. Of the eight plans studied, advisory boards ranked the lowest in terms of: (1) the initiatives they generated in the community, and (2) the impact their activities had on the community. (Yates, 1973, pp. 64-67).

All advisory committees perform a lightning rod function in the community regardless of whether they are oriented to administrative participation or political participation. They serve to attract, collect and focus community needs and grievances. In the case of the administration-oriented committee, action on the needs and grievances is at the discretion of the administration. In the case of the politically-oriented committee, action is demanded by the committee. If action does not take place, conflict ensues. When this occurs, a strong attempt is normally made by the administration to privatize the conflict, that is, to prevent it from becoming a public conflict. Privatizing the conflict has the effect of restricting the scope of involvement in the conflict. Socializing the conflict or "going public" with it has the effect, on the other hand, of enlarging the scope of involvement in the conflict (Schattschneider, 1960, p.12).

When faced with the need and desire of the officials to keep the conflict private, no advisory committee can win. The paid and elected officials have all the resources and authority they need to effect their will. The only hope for an advisory committee that is failing to influence these decision-makers is to find alternate access points to the decision system and to socialize the conflict by going "public" (Pross, 1975, p.23).

The Importance of "Going Public"

Schattschneider (1960) has pointed out that in any political conflict there are two basic elements: (1) a few individuals or groups who are actively engaged in the centre of the conflict, and (2) a large passive audience casually watching the conflict who may enter it at any time as combattants on one side or another (p.66). In a conflict

situation then, paid elected officials who control the authority and resources do all they can to keep the audience out. That is, a deliberate attempt is made to privatize the conflict. The individuals or groups who are powerless in their means to influence officials do everything they can to bring the audience in. That is, a deliberate attempt is made to socialize the conflict. In this way, the powerless individuals or groups try to gain allies from the political audience.

One of the most effective ways in which to gain the attention of the political audience is through protest. Lipsky (1970) has pointed out that paid and elected officials will stall, hold endless meetings, conduct studies and be attentive without being responsive. Action on the part of officials is more likely to occur when protest occurs. The protesters try to bring members of the political audience into the combat. Lipsky (1968) points out these members of the political audience or "reference publics", upon being convinced that the protests are well-founded, use their force to influence the paid and elected officials to accede to the protesters' demands.

Political protest is difficult to mount and sustain (Yates, 1973, p. 153). The generation of protest is dependent on the existence of highly charged issues and events. The sustaining of a protest movement is dependent upon good organization, good leadership and a series of overt actions to keep protest enthusiasm high. If there are not highly charged issues, or if there is poor organization and leadership and no sustained program of protest activities, the protest movement will either not develop or will fizzle out soon after its emergence.

Understanding the Ideal School Case

When Ideal School consultative committee was first established it

was an administration-oriented committee, interested primarily in advising the school on a variety of concerns. When the school board announced in March, 1976 that Ideal School would be moving to Byng Secondary, the committee became a politically-oriented committee. Up until December, 1976, the conflict between the Ideal committee and the Vancouver board and its officials was a privatized conflict. All meetings and discussions had been held in private as the board and officials said that the relocation of Ideal School was a property matter. With the early December decision of the school board that Ideal would definitely be moved to Byng, the Ideal committee decided to "go public". Their efforts to socialize the conflict through protest gained them important allies in the public audience.

When the move to Byng actually took place in January, 1977, it appeared that the Ideal protest might fizzle out. The school consultative committee with able leadership, provided the solid base needed for sustained protest activities. These sustained efforts of the committee throughout the spring of 1977 resulted in the decision of the school board to move the Ideal students out of Byng into the Shannon Park Primary. At this point, the Ideal protest group met opposition from a new protest group. The Shannon Park group did not have any organizational base but they did have a highly charged issue, i.e. the preservation of the quiet, residential character of their neighborhood. The group also had able leadership and large numbers. As a result, the school board decided that the pressures of the Shannon Park group were stronger than those of the Ideal committee. Consequently, no move of Ideal School to Shannon Park took place.

When the school board made its decision in late June, 1977 to relocate

Ideal School in the Laurier primary building, it was expected there would be strong opposition to this relocation and the opposition would be led by the Laurier school consultative committee. As it turned out, the Laurier school consultative committee was defunct and there was no organizational base on which opposition could build. Many Laurier residents were opposed to the relocation of Ideal but no strong leaders emerged to forge this opposition into a formidable political protest. Furthermore, what little protest that was mounted could not be sustained because of the intervention of the summer holidays. In the end then, the Ideal School committee gained its objective of a new and appropriate home for its school.

Concluding Statement

The widespread adoption of citizen advisory committees at the school level by educators and school boards represents an attempt to provide for meaningful public involvement in educational decision-making. These committees have produced administrative rather than political participation and consequently have done little to reduce the feelings of powerlessness that many citizens feel in dealing with schools and school boards. Nowhere are their feelings of powerlessness and alienation more pronounced than among the middle class, traditionally the strongest allies and supporters of education. As one writer notes:

> Ours has been a system based on middle class values... whose decision-making was in safe, solid middle class hands. What has happened, it seems, is that the powerful institutions on which the middle class could always rely - business and government - are no longer reliable, no longer accountable.... Not only is the middle class less coddled than before, when it complains its complaints go unheeded (Williams, 1975, p.13).

Quite clearly what is needed in education are political mechanisms

that provide for more meaningful participation in educational decision-making, particularly at the local school level. These political mechanisms, if they are to be successful, must recognize that successful citizen involvement in political decision-making occurs only when certain basic conditions are met. Palmer and Jacobson (1974) and Yen and Yates (1975) have identified these basic conditions as follows: (1) People act when they have some sort of self-interest at stake; (2) People act when then have a clear and compelling diagnosis of the needs of the situation; (3) People act when they have a meaningful prescription or remedy for the situation; and (4) People act when they have a sense of power to enforce the necessary prescription.

Citizen advisory committees, in their present forms, fail largely to meet these four basic conditions for successful involvement in public decision-making. Until these conditions are met to a greater degree, the political scene of school system-community relations will continue to be characterized by periods of quiesence punctuated by organized anomic outbursts in which disaffected citizens attempt through political protest to counterbalance the power of school authorities.

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